

TRANSCRIPT: WEBCHAT ON “AMERICAN CULTURE: BEYOND THE POP CULTURE MYTHS”

Moderator (Edith): Welcome to our webchat on “American Culture: Beyond the Pop Culture Myths” on Thursday, May 27 at 3:30 pm (IST). You may submit your questions anytime before or during the webchat

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): Hello! welcome to the webchat. Looking forward to your questions.

Daniel Kelin: Good afternoon. Pleased to be here this afternoon. I look forward to chatting with you during this session.

Daniel Kelin: What a great picture to start. An example of both the gaudiness of Pop Culture in America, but also the reality of small town life, in a way

Daniel Kelin: One of the biggest behemoths of American Pop Culture, as everyone knows, is American Idol. It captures the celebrity aspect of Pop Culture as well as the desire for people who are coming from nowhere to achieve fame and fortune...sometimes called the American Dream.

Daniel Kelin: Here is another amazing icon of American Culture. And I love this picture because it shows the transformation of a person as they become a product of their own fame [*picture of Michael Jackson*]. We watched him become a product, something that happens with fame and popularity...and becomes a fantasy representation of America

Daniel Kelin: This is an America that people often seen. That fame, that celebrity.

Daniel Kelin: In that same vein, another aspect of 'pop culture.' This kind of tough, street character that is popular in many films. It is a persona that is cultivated by many youngsters because of the lure of popularity.

Daniel Kelin: This takes us straight to movies and popular media which are the leaders in spreading Pop Culture. America is almosty ruled by Hollywood and much of the world knows American culture through films, like many other places. But the challenge with films is the stereotypes that get portrayed and become the icons of popular culture.

Daniel Kelin: Another strong pop image, of the tough guy. And who better to portray that then Clint Eastwood, a long time icon of American film.

Daniel Kelin: Pop culture is defined nowadays by corporations. In the days of Clint Eastwood, it was more about personalities that were large and engaging, but now it is more about marketing ideas and images, something that Disney represents. Many children copy Disney characters because the influence is so great.

Daniel Kelin: Television is the other great image maker, and with televisions available in towns, cities and villages around the world, American 'culture' gets into households everywhere and you can hear people thinking how strange Americans are. In the case of this TV show, The Simpsons, it even makes fun of the pop cultures images of America itself

Daniel Kelin: Another strange icon of American TV, SpongeBob, but this time aimed at children, where more and more the pop image makers aim thier attentions

Daniel Kelin: American Pop Culture is now at the place where it is making fun of itself and sometimes people no longer know what is real, what is an stereotype of the real and what is making fun of all of it.

Daniel Kelin: I think to end this section, it is important to note the icons of American consumerism, which is sending brands around the world. We start to see America as a country of people with lots of money, always out buying and spending that money. And the image of a place becomes greater than what it sells or makes.

Daniel Kelin: McDonald's is the king of American marketing and an icon that many people recognize just because it is famous.

Daniel Kelin: For me, this is more of an icon of the America that I think of sometimes...a little joke of both consumerism and American icons.

Daniel Kelin: A definition. American Pop Culture is the icons and stereotypes of America. The marketing and the fame. Americana is more the 'real' parts of America. The things that make America what it is.

Daniel Kelin: To begin, if we get away from all the celebrities and famous people, we have the American family. The dream or the goal for an American family is security and comfort, basically. A home, a car, good job, kids in good schools, a nice neighborhood.

Daniel Kelin: Yes, Americans love cars and material things, but that is a true part of America. We as Americans are taken with things that are big and expensive. But the fame of celebrity is something we watch from a distance, and a car is the way for us to enjoy our own little bit of fame and wealth.

Daniel Kelin: I think it is always important not to forget that in the land of wealth and fame, there is a down side to it all that cannot be forgotten, something that is a true part of everyday America. This part is often ignored or pushed aside, but it is an unfortunate reality that is a part of America

Daniel Kelin: Here's a good example of what I think is where America is headed. A multi-cultural world that isn't fully portrayed in all the American Pop Culture images. This is a real American classroom that shows the diversity of a country that still predominately shows images of very few cultures.

Daniel Kelin: This is Obama's class when he was a kid. It shows that parts of America have been a great cultural mix for a long time, something that doesn't show up in American Pop Culture too often.

Daniel Kelin: Guess where Obama is

Daniel Kelin: I like this picture because it begins to show the mix of America. The mix that I know. Cultures practicing traditions of other cultures to create a shared culture.

Daniel Kelin: American has so many beautiful images that should be celebrated more.

Daniel Kelin: I love the image of a Macy's sign (American consumerism) with the dancer beneath, celebrating a cultural day.

Daniel Kelin: America is a place of great loves, such as sports. But the important aspect of this is how it brings people together in celebration of their culture

Daniel Kelin: Technology is another great love of Americans, which in a strange way is bringing people together in ways that they never could before. Again, the strange mix of consumerism and American daily culture

Daniel Kelin: We do love celebrity, but we mostly love watching it. Peeking into other's lives. We, as Americans, don't really want to live the crazy lives of celebrities, but we do like to watch.

Daniel Kelin: Some things that I like to promote in American culture is the sometimes forgotten great art that we produce and make available to everyone

Daniel Kelin: We are the creators of Musical Theatre, which is now being seen and produced around the globe

Daniel Kelin: Great visual art celebrating another great creation of America...Jazz

Daniel Kelin: Great writers who captured aspects of American life in Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer...just a small example

Daniel Kelin: I love this as an end. A great American painting capturing an aspect of what American life has truly been like

Daniel Kelin: Thanks for watching. Questions?

Veronika: Do you think that the American Dream still 'fits' into the present time, or was it just a kind of motivation during the hard times, e.g. 1920s?

Daniel Kelin: For me, it still fits. It changes with time and need, but it is a constant part of our culture

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): I think it's still extremely relevant. Most Americans are taught to strive from a very young age.

Veronika: Are there any topics, approaches, methods, or styles that you have to avoid because of the culture and its differences?

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): One of the themes of the American recovery is that individuals, small businesses and entrepreneurs will be heavily involved in getting the U.S. back on its feet.

Daniel Kelin: I try not to avoid culture. I think it is important to work with it. But as individuals we need to stay open and responsive. Not make assumptions about each other, but be willing to learn from. I LOVE working with children for this very reason. I learn so much about them.

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): I don't believe so.

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): The show Glee celebrates the "freak" and shows that everyone can find someone to relate to.

Veronika: What is the age range of the groups of people you work with?

Daniel Kelin: I work with children from 3 years old and up. I work with teachers as well. My favorite is upper elementary, about grades 3-6

Anandaropa: What are your thoughts on the corporatization of American pop culture? With corporate money there is restriction, which restricts artistic creativity.

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): Often people complain about this type of thing in NYC.

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): They call it the "disneyfication" of Times Square.

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): On one hand, the area is safer and more popular than ever, but on the other hand, it has lost some of its uniqueness.

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): Many locals complain, while tourists love it. It's a balancing act. There will always be concerns about corporations taking over, but as long as there is some balance, it can have its place

Shailesh: What's the mission? What are you aiming to teach the children?

Daniel Kelin: In my teaching, missions and goals change with programs. But, in essence, I am always providing a place for children to become arbiters of their own creativity and talent. That they become stronger individuals with strong minds and purposes.

Veronika: Do you think that people e.g. in Europe understand the American Culture or do they just know the stereotypes?

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): I think most people want to try to understand each other's culture, but they are inundated with the images of Hollywood and it can be difficult.

amy: When so many people around the world are exposed only to the media images of America, how can people learn more in depth about American culture, and the ways it may differ from the popular perception?

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): I think that in general, people get past those stereotypes with one-on-one interactions.

Daniel Kelin: One of the great things I think is the internet. But it is something you need to spend time with. The other place I think is important to follow are the arts. You can learn--I have learned--so much about a place and people through literature. You can avoid the corporate mentality often through more cultural artforms that celebrate aspects of culture and tradition

Veronika: what about Hollywood and Bollywood? Isn't it in the end a great couple?

Daniel Kelin: Completely, One side of the same coin (joke)

Daniel Kelin: And both are very laden with stereotypes

Shailesh: Environmentalism is an area where the US is lagging behind. Do you offer any programs in this area for the children?

Daniel Kelin: I have. Especially about the rainforest, ocean life, and how actions affect natural life. A hard topic for children, but when they can 'feel' it, then it becomes more tangible and real. Something that can be accomplished well through drama. Actually, something I have done with children here in India as well

Shailesh: Would you be conducting any workshops in Chennai as part of American cultural activities?

Daniel Kelin: I am not sure, at present. I hope to be conducting a workshop for teachers at some point during my stay. Hopefully other opportunities will arise as well

Brindha (Moderator): We are about to wrap up. If you have any other questions, please send them now.

Shailesh: Would college students be participating in these workshops as actors or do you prefer professionals?

Daniel Kelin: I would welcome anyone interested.

Brindha (Moderator): Please have a look at the publication <http://www.america.gov/publications/books-content/american-lives.html>

Bridget (U.S. Consulate Chennai): Thank you for joining us today. It's been an interesting dialogue.

Daniel Kelin: Thanks for listening and chatting. I enjoyed myself. I hope you found something of interest today. Aloha.

Veronika: Thank you very much, it was very absorbing. And good luck with all the projects!

Anandaropa: Thank you!

Hemanth Kumar Neal: congratulations to Ambassador Timothy J Roemer for the 1st anniversary of being appointed by president Obama to India on this day in 2009

Brindha (Moderator): Thank you all. Also look at this: <http://www.america.gov/publications/books-content/pop-culture-vs-real-america.html>. We are just an SMS away - send a text to 54999 with the words TALK2US and start receiving sms alerts on our programs, events and much more. Thank you again, and hope to see you all at our next chat!